

An archive of the future

Professor Premesh Lalu

*Founding director of the
Centre for Humanities Research*



*The addition of Rashid Lombard's
photographic collection adds substantially
to UWC's notable archives*

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) recently entered into a partnership with photographer Rashid Lombard to house his substantial archival collection, which promises to offer expanded perspectives on the everyday cultural and political life of the Cape Flats. Consisting of a vast photographic record of Cape Flats history from the 1960s onwards, as well as an equally vast documentation of the history of jazz in South Africa, the Rashid Lombard Collection brings into view a hitherto repressed and often neglected feature of life under apartheid.

There is much to be said about the confidence expressed by Rashid Lombard in his decision to deposit his collection at UWC. The institution has set in motion the first stages of a project on archival renewal through the establishment of a state-of-the-art archive facility to deepen and enhance its student and faculty research initiatives. Beyond the fact that the Lombard collection provides us with an opportunity to delve into a significant part of the institution's courageous fight against apartheid in higher education, it also opens up new areas of research. This has the potential, for instance, to advance the ongoing collaborations with students and faculty convened by Professor Patricia Hayes, the SARCHI Chair in Visual History and Theory in the Centre for Humanities Research, as well as other research initiatives across the university, not to mention the much wider public interest generated by this collection.

The photograph taken by Lombard, of a group seated in the shade of a tree, encapsulates how significant the collection is for UWC and its broader engagements with a fledgling post-apartheid public sphere. This image of Jakes Gerwel and Thabo Mbeki (first and second right) depicts a crucial aspect of the institution's history. According to Lombard, the photograph of the Vice-Chancellor of UWC and the head of the ANC's information department was taken after a private breakfast meeting in Dakar in 1987 that included UWC colleagues André Odendaal, Ampie Coetzee, and Jaap Durand. The photograph tells the story of an enthusiastic discussion, in an otherwise relaxed atmosphere, that culminated in a decision to deposit the collections of the International Defence Aid Fund (IDAF) at the newly established Mayibuye Centre for Culture and History at UWC.

The decision about the IDAF collection coincided with a process of a massive academic reorientation at the university. The institution had secured its independence from the paternalistic oversight required by the apartheid state after a long and exhausting struggle, placing it on the path to its emergence as a fully fledged university in its own right. The institution found itself on the threshold of a leadership change that would see the appointment of Jakes Gerwel as the Vice-Chancellor in 1987. Gerwel's inaugural lecture is a matter of legend, and he is widely credited with taking the university into an abiding commitment to preparing the grounds for a post-apartheid future, even at the very height of apartheid's most aggressive and violent phase. By securing a research collection of the international anti-apartheid struggle and placing it at the very foundation of his plans for UWC, Gerwel made clear his intention for UWC to become a university with a broad research vision directed at thinking ahead, towards a future beyond the dread of apartheid from which the institution struggled to emerge. It is thus fitting that Lombard's collection, as if destined to be located at UWC, should become part of the very legacy inaugurated during that 1987 photograph.

Former UWC Rector, Prof Jakes Gerwel and a South African delegation travelled to Dakar, Senegal, to meet with the ANC in exile in 1987. Here, they are meeting former president Thabo Mbeki



Photograph by Rashid Lombard, Dakar, 1987

Moving forward, the Rashid Lombard Collection may help to expand the standard national narrative of the struggle against apartheid by drawing attention to the cultural politics and everyday life that enabled millions to negotiate the landscapes of racial segregation in a divided city. It is an archive that provides insight through carefully crafted and curated materials related to the sensory experiences of apartheid that are often neglected and overlooked in research inquiries across a range of fields of study in South African higher education institutions. To the extent that it places us in a proximate relation to the evocative histories of photography and jazz on the Cape Flats, we may begin to hear the strains of freedom buried in the images formed out of the past in an archival collection of national and international significance that comprises about 500 000 photographs, 120 cinematic works, audio recordings, literary works and ephemera.

The Lombard collection represents an act of renewal, both at the levels of the archival commitments of UWC and in the efforts to relink sense and perception in the divided city.

Much excitement is beginning to form around the arrival of the collection at UWC, with the prospect of new research projects that will be initiated through the Centre for Humanities Research, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and more broadly across the university. The collection - to be housed at the university's new archive facility, which will also hold the RIM-UWC-Mayibuye Archive, among others - stands as a valuable resource in rethinking the past and imagining a future that not only serves UWC's public commitments but also revitalises its research projects across a broad spectrum of inquiries, from Land and Agrarian Studies, to Public Health, to Food Security, and to Community Law. The Rashid Lombard Collection has the potential to catalyse new questions and attitudes about the making of a post-apartheid future across these research platforms.